

And They Breathe. by Genevie

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Summary:

They know that the water is always there, seeping into the world beneath their feet, making the ground soft and unreliable. Every misstep is like a free fall. Their stomachs knot. Their throats tighten.

And They Breathe.

There are two people drowning in shallow water. They are clinging to each other in tenuous, unsure ways, oblivious to how near they are to the surface. Each pulls the other in an opposite direction, and neither looks up to see the sunlight beaming onto the rippling surface. They do not want to drown. They do not want to acquiesce. So they fight each other this way, in the manner of two people who cannot bear to remain in love, until their arms are tired and the skin beneath their fingers is pruned and unfamiliar. Only then do they realise that they can let go of each other.

She floats to the surface.

He sinks to the bottom.



People have this thing they say when they believe they've outgrown their pasts: You can't go home again. Hopper thinks it's bullshit. When his divorce is finalised, home is the only place he can think to go. Tragedy doesn't keep property in Hawkins, Indiana, where bad things happen in small, easily swallowed doses; where people eschew the small town cliché and actually mind their own business; where Sarah's ghost can only reach him when he's alone.

She's everywhere in the city, Sarah is. She's the marrow in the bones of his house, the pansies in his garden. She's the laughter of the neighbour's kids—five of them, all healthy. She's the footprints in the snow leading down the pathways they walked to school, or to the park, or to the corner store that sells candies all the way from Belgium. She is in his wife's eyes, barely lit but there, sad, lonely, out of reach. She is in the cemetery near the police station and that's the worst thing, that he can't even drive to work without feeling like he's left his heart lying with her, suffocating beneath six feet of dirt.

“You're moving back to Hawkins?” his wife—ex-wife now, he'll have to get used to that, too—asks when he tells her his intentions. She barely looks at him and he knows it's because he carries hints of their daughter in himself, same as she does.

"Thinkin' about it. Yeah."

"Oh," she says after a pause. "Okay. Yes. Yeah. That sounds like a good idea."

He's not sure what else he expected. An argument, an insult, a barrage of questions on whether he's thought this through. If not resistance, then maybe support. If not support, then maybe confusion; if not confusion then maybe some lingering trace of affection or concern or even just a little bit of interest. But she is done with him and he must be done with her, and the fact of his life now is this:

Jim Hopper is alone.



He grows a beard because it's hard enough for him to get out of bed in the morning, hard enough for him to get dressed. He shaves that beard because he feels like he should at least make an effort. He hates look of his face when it's smooth, so he grows the beard back.

It's strange how much of an effect a cluster of facial hair can have on his ability to look his own damned face in the mirror. His clean face belonged to his wife, to his daughter, to the past he decided that he doesn't want anymore. But this face, with its scruffiness and its drawn-down features? It's his, just his.

So is the beer. So are the pills. So are the cigarettes.



There comes a time when he wants to remember Sarah, when he wants for there to be pieces of her in his new home. He and his ex-wife had passed on more than a few houses like it when they were looking for a place to start a family.hovels, she'd called them. He disagreed. Not because he wanted to live in one, because he didn't, but because he knew how it felt to live in that kind of home. Knew how much hard work and love went into them, knew that they could feel immensely like home even if their plumbing was rusting and paint and plaster peeked through peeling wallpaper.

The beard stays and his new vices stay, but he adds one of Sarah's

drawings to the wall beside the front door, right above the light switches, right beside the cheeky key-shaped key rack the past owners had left behind. This way, he'll see it at least twice a day, even if just from the corner of his eyes, and more often than that if he remembers to turn the lights off.

He calls his ex-wife to thank her for sending him the picture. She tells him to give her more space after that, and he decides that's as good of a reason as any to get shit-faced drunk.



Joyce is at the bar, alone. He hasn't spoken with her since he returned. She's a different part of his past, less painful than the other but with its own dull ache, right in the pit of his stomach. Neither one of them is the person who they'd hoped to become when they were young and every kiss felt like a promise, and that fills him with a queasy sort of shame. He wonders if that's why she hasn't sought him out, either.

Or maybe she's just busy. He knows that she's a single mother, that she has two boys, that she works whichever shifts she can get at the store, even when they're back-to-back. Exhaustion has settled on her like a sheet of dust, and she looks skittish in ways which can't be blamed on the three empty shot glasses on the table in front of her.

He takes a seat at the bar facing away from her and orders a whiskey. She approaches the bar after her fifth drink and asks the bartender, a young guy who Hopper doesn't recognise, with a long, bored face and a shock of ginger hair, to call her a cab home. She doesn't notice Hopper and he not sure if that disappoints him or not.



Years pass, same-y and languid, before a new story begins.

It's a story about a missing boy and a dead teenage girl, about a child with superpowers and the three boys who teach her what it means to have friends. It's the story of a woman who will believe anything if it means that her son is alive, that he can be saved, even if it also means that she speaks more to the lights than she does to anyone else

for a while.

It is the story of a police chief who ran away from his greatest tragedy and almost became party to another, but instead he came through. Instead, he helped save the day.



Now, it's a ghost story.

There's this feeling that Hopper gets now, like Sarah's body has sprouted roots that stretch all the way to the ground beneath his feet. Small, yellow flowers, so pale they're almost white, begin to grow in front of his house and along the routes he frequents, and he steps differently when he's near them because those flowers are his Christmas lights.

He knows that Sarah is gone in a way different from how Will was gone, but because he also knows that there's more to the world than what is immediately apparent, he chooses to believe that his little girl still exists—somewhere safe where she can send flowers instead of warnings, where she can know joy instead of fear.

Sarah is not Hopper's only ghost. Eleven doesn't leave him flowers, doesn't find strange ways to communicate. And even if she could, it's not like she'd choose to reach out to him over her friends, even over Joyce. But she is present in ways he cannot measure, and the waffles he leaves for her are always gone when he returns.

This is one of many secrets he keeps now. He knows that her friends deserve to know that she's alive, knows that Mike in particular mourns for her in a rough, raw sort of way that edges into even his happiest moments and grates against him so hard that little pieces of him are always bleeding grief. He will tell them the truth one day, but not before he knows that he can make this one more thing right.

And then there is Will.



In old photos, Will has a shy sort of spark in his eyes, like he exists on constant verge of a breakthrough but isn't confident enough, or proud

enough, or foolish enough to take whatever it is that's inside of him and shape it into something he can share with other people.

That spark is gone now.

Years worth of playing Dungeons and Dragons with his friends has made Will into an adept storyteller, a more than passable liar. He can flip the truth on the edge of a dime. He is always fine. He always has good days. And most people look at his smile and at the steady way he carries himself like a young man aged in graceful ways by his disappearance and they think, there is a brave boy, there is a strong boy, there is a boy who is going to be just fine.

Hopper sees the fear in his eyes, a dark presence lurking in the murky green. When those eyes do spark, it's with frustration; when they dull, there's a certain strain in them that he recognises from his own eyes, so he knows how deep it goes, knows that Will is harbouring a cellular pain that's changing him slowly from the inside-out.

Joyce takes him to a shrink shortly after New Year's, once she's sure that he's well enough to try to talk. The psychiatrist is an older man who used to practise in Indianapolis but semi-retired into a quiet life in a farming community a few towns west of Hawkins. She think it'll be good for him, more relaxed than visiting an office.

It's not. "How am I supposed to get him any help when he can't even talk about what happened?" Joyce says to Hopper later in the day of the appointment, an anxious quaver working its way back into her voice.

"Look, I can give it a shot. Talking with people, it comes with the job."

"No, Hopper, no. You've already done... more than enough. He's my boy. I need to. I need to figure this out. I'll figure this out."

"You sure?"

"I'm his mom. If he can't talk to me, then... I'm sure, Hopper. Thank you."



There was a time when Hopper wondered how Joyce looked without tears in her eyes, without a face thinned by the agony of loss, without a constant tremble that began in her heart and stretched into her fingers so that her cigarettes shook even when she was too exhausted to feel anything besides deeply numb. Now, he's surprised to see her crying again.

"I'm sorry." Her voice is cracked and soft beneath the tinny sound of one of Will's video games.

"Hey," he says, "It's okay."

Will's anger still hangs in the Byers' living room like smoke from a wildfire, hot and thick. Hopper had heard him over the phone, yelling at Joyce to leave him alone, that he's fine, that it isn't unusual for a thirteen-year-old boy to get desperately angry when his mother tells him that it's time to get off the Atari.

"He's a good boy, he's just going through a hard time."

"I know."

"I think... he doesn't know what to do with himself?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know, he starts thinking about... what happened to him and unless he can focus on something else he can't stop. And I know, Hopper, I know that doesn't make this okay but. I just. I can't understand him anymore. He doesn't want me to understand." Joyce presses the balls of her palms against her eyes, curls in on herself, and Hopper sits beside her, close enough that he can feel the warmth of her knee against his own.

If she was any other person, he would have ended the conversation there, would have given her time to collect herself. But Joyce is Joyce. She has no stop button. She powers through everything without pause. It's how she survives. "That's not true," he says, and he means it entirely. "He just needs some time."

"Time." The word comes out like a laugh, pained and sharp. "He needs more than time, Hopper."

“Yeah, he does. But you'll figure all that out. Okay?”

“Okay.”



When Joyce shows up at his house days later, cast in the shadows of the moon, he feels the way he felt years ago in the small park in the big city where Sarah first struggled to breathe. His mind immediately drags him to the worst places—a world where Will is hurt, a world where he has run away, a world where he's slipped back into the upside-down, a world where that slip has killed him.

“What is it?” he asks. “What's wrong?”

“Wrong? No, nothing's wrong.”

“Then why are you here?”

“The boys aren't home,” she says. “Will's spending the night at the Wheelers' place, and Jonathan's still on that trip with his photography class.”

Hopper's heart still beats like a bird trapped in his ribcage, but the feeling of dread is gone. “So... you... didn't want to be alone, or...help me out here, would you?”

“Or,” she says, slipping past him through the door. She smells of cigarettes and a cheap perfume, equal parts chemical and floral notes. Her clothes are typical—baggy jeans, a t-shirt, a jacket one size too large—and her hair is the same as always. Joyce has never been about presentation, about pretending that she's anything separate from how she appears. He envies her that.

He lets her pull him down to her, lets her press her lips against his. She feels like winter against his bare chest; touches him like it's 1960 again and she's still fascinated by the newness of the male body. He guides her, stumbling, to his bedroom, and finds himself not caring about how many empties are strewn across the living room floor, or about the bottles of pills on the coffee table. It doesn't matter if she sees them any more than it mattered to her when Hopper was there to absorb the shockwaves of her grief.

It's funny, he thinks, how lust works its way into the mind, how desire takes form in the body. He hadn't realise how much he had wanted her until she had wanted him, and now he can't fathom wanting anybody else more.

There are no words spoken between them besides tiny consents, besides breathy commands. Their bodies have aged and scarred and stretched but are the same enough to trigger old instincts. She knows where to trail her tongue, when to suck; he has fingers that move in synergic response to her body. It is as if the simple act of having sex has made them each a connected part of the other.

With her help, he slips inside of her, growing thicker at the feeling of her wetness, her heat. He thrusts once, tentatively, then again with more force and Joyce moves to meet him each time, and she pants and she fists her hands at the back of his neck, and she places his name in whispers on her tongue, and each time she does he kisses it away, feeding her his own soft moans.

He is done first; she, second, her hands in his hair, holding his face close, guiding him where she wants him to be. She slips into the bathroom to pee and to get dressed, modesty reasserting itself now that her body is tired and her lust spent. Then she leaves. He wants to ask her to stay but she is a mother with one son who worries her and another who worries about her, and she can only stay away for so long, even when nobody is waiting for her at home.



Will is okay.

Will is not okay.

There is a pattern to this cycle of okayness, and when Joyce lays her electric bills out before him, Hopper doesn't even think to doubt her insistence that there's a correlation between Will's outbursts and the sudden increase in her electricity usage.

"It's weird, right?" she says, her pitch high again, frantic. Hopper thinks about how low her moan is in comparison, thinks about pushing her down on the couch, sharing another wordless

conversation. Sex is his distraction though, not Joyce's. He's not even sure that she has one.

"Yeah, these numbers make no sense. You haven't noticed anything strange, have you? No sudden fluctuations, things powering on by themselves, anything you can think of?"

Joyce shakes her head no, grabs the pack of cigarettes on the arm of the couch, doesn't take one out. "What can it mean?"

It can mean a lot of things, Hopper knows, but all of those possibilities converge on a single point: the upside-down is still wrapped around Will like a thick web, still lodged in his throat, still breeding in his belly.

He thinks about Sarah, about the cancer that slipped into her unnoticed until it was already too late. He thinks about Will, who is so good when he is well, who makes him understand how easily Joyce believed she had found him in the lights. "I don't know," he says, wishing that she would just grab a cigarette already, wishing that she would offer him one. "I'm going to head back to the station, see what I can find out there. You going to be all right here?"

She nods. Pulls a cigarette from the pack. Doesn't offer him one. Oh well. She walks him to the door and leans against the frame, taking long drags of her cigarette in quick sequence, watching him leave.

The grass outside her house is like sunshine, filled with the small, blonde flowers that follow Hopper to work, to the liquor store, to his house, along the routes he patrols. And now, to here. They make him realise how much time he's been spending at the Byers house, how lightly but indelibly both Joyce and Will have lain their own roots in his veins, have sprouted their own flowers.

"Wait," she says, and she runs up beside him, bracing herself against the cold. "I'm coming with you."



There are two people drowning in deep water. They do not swim together. They think they are alone.

After some time, the water begins to darken. It shifts. It churns. It tastes like death on their lips, and as they're choking on the flavour they finally hear each other. He swims to her and she swims to him, and they meet with their hands, fingers intertwined. Together, they turn the water upside-right and find themselves standing again.

They know that the water is always there, seeping into the world beneath their feet, making the ground soft and unreliable. Every misstep is like a free fall. Their stomachs knot. Their throats tighten.

And they breathe.